



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE ILIAD

The Rage Of Achilles

Volume V of seven - Part Five

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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PART FIVE: THE RAGE OF ACHILLES

CHAPTER 19: THE RIVER RUNS RED

The battle began, and Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) was no longer a man. He was a force of nature with a spear in his hand, grief and rage compressed into human shape. Where he walked, Trojans fell. Where he turned, men ran. The plain that had swallowed so many Greek lives over so many months now demanded Trojan blood in return, and Achilles was its willing instrument.

Zeus had given the gods permission to enter the fray. Hera (HEER-uh), Athena (ah-THEE- nuh), Poseidon (poh-SYE-dun), Hermes (HUR-meez), and Hephaestus (heh-FES-tus) sided with the Greeks. Ares (AIR-eez), Apollo (uh-POL-oh), Artemis (AR-teh-mis), Leto (LEE-toh), and Aphrodite (af-roh-DYE-tee) stood with Troy. The earth itself trembled at the discord. Even Hades, lord of the dead, felt fear: the pounding above his head threatened to crack the world open and expose his dark kingdom to unwanted light.

But Achilles cared nothing for the gods' quarrels. He had one name on his lips, one face in his mind: Hector. Until he found him, every Trojan who crossed his path would pay the debt of Patroclus's death in advance.

Apollo sought out Aeneas (ee-NEE-us) and put courage into his heart. The prince strode out to meet Achilles, and for a moment the whole battle seemed to hold its breath.

"Aeneas," Achilles called, "do you hope to rule Troy if you kill me? Have you forgotten how I chased you down Mount Ida once before?"

"I remember your words as well as you do," Aeneas answered. "We are both sons of divine mothers. But the tongue is not the spear. Let us see which of us the gods favour today."

He cast his spear. It struck the shield of Hephaestus and drove through two layers of bronze before the inner gold stopped it. Achilles threw in turn, and his spear punched clean through the rim of Aeneas's shield. Achilles drew his sword and sprang forward.

But Poseidon was watching. Aeneas was not fated to die today. The god veiled Achilles's eyes in mist, lifted Aeneas from the earth, and set him down far behind the lines among the Cauconians.

"Foolish man," Poseidon told him. "Never face Achilles again. When Achilles is dead, then you may fight among the foremost."

When the mist cleared, Achilles found his spear at his feet and his enemy gone. He did not waste time wondering. He turned back to the battle and opened the floodgates of slaughter.

What followed was not war. It was harvest.

Iphition, son of Otrynteus, fell first, his skull split by the Pelian spear. Demoleon, Antenor's brave son, took a spear through the temple. Hippiodamas died as he leaped from his chariot, bellowing like a bull dragged to sacrifice. Polydorus, Priam's youngest son, sprinted through the front ranks until Achilles's spear found the golden clasps of his belt and pierced him through.

When Hector (HEK-tor) saw his brother fall, something broke inside him. He charged at Achilles, his spear raised, his heart screaming for vengeance.

Achilles saw him coming and laughed - not a sound of joy, but the wild, broken laugh of a man who has lost everything.

"Here he is! The man who killed my friend!"

Hector cast his spear. Athena breathed on it and turned it aside. It fell harmless at his feet. Achilles sprang at him, but Apollo caught Hector up and hid him in darkness. Thrice Achilles struck at empty air. Thrice his spear found nothing.

"Hound!" he shouted. "Apollo saves you again! But I will find you. I swear it on the soul of Patroclus."

He turned his fury on whoever remained. Dryops died at his feet. Laogonus and Dardanus were thrown from their chariot. Tros clasped Achilles's knees and begged for mercy. Achilles drove his sword home. Mulius, Echeclus, Deucalion, Rhigmus, Areithous - the names piled up like kindling.

The plain ran dark. The chariot wheels churned through blood and dust. The axle of Achilles's car was spattered. His hands were red to the wrists.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The Greeks had a word for what Achilles does here: *aristeia*, meaning "the best moment" - a warrior's peak performance in battle, when he seems more than human. But Homer gives us three very different *aristeiai* in the Iliad. Diomedes's in Book 5 is thrilling: he wounds two gods and survives. Patroclus's is tragic: we watch him rise and fall in the same breath. Achilles's is terrifying. The same poet who makes us cheer for Diomedes makes us recoil from Achilles. This is the Iliad's moral complexity at its sharpest: the greatest warrior is not the greatest man.

The Trojans broke and ran towards the river.

Half fled across the plain towards the city. The other half found themselves driven into the Scamander (skuh-MAN-dur), the broad river that flowed across the Trojan plain. The gods

called it Xanthus (ZAN-thus), "the golden," but there was nothing golden about it now. The water churned with men and horses, with shields and bodies, with desperate cries.

Achilles left his spear on the bank and waded in with his sword alone. He did not fight. He reaped. The Trojans huddled under the banks like fish fleeing a dolphin, but there was no escape. When his arm tired of killing, he dragged twelve young men alive from the water. They would die on Patroclus's pyre. Even mercy, in Achilles's hands, had become a weapon of revenge.

Then he saw Lycaon (lye-KAY-on).

Lycaon was Priam's son, another of Hector's brothers. Achilles had captured him once before, eleven days past, in the vineyards outside Troy. He had sold him as a slave to Lemnos for a hundred oxen. A guest-friend had ransomed him, and Lycaon had made his way home through suffering and stealth, arriving back at Troy only to find the Greeks still at the gates.

Twelve days of freedom. That was all heaven had granted him.

Now he floundered in the river, unarmed, his helmet and shield cast aside. He saw Achilles and his heart failed. But instinct drove him forward. He caught Achilles by the knees, the universal gesture of the suppliant, the posture that even enemies were bound by sacred custom to respect.

"Achilles," he gasped, "have mercy. I ate bread in your tent when you took me prisoner. You sold me for a hundred oxen, and I paid three times that to win my freedom. It has been only twelve days. My mother bore two sons, and you have already killed my brother Polydorus. Do not make her childless."

He looked up into Achilles's eyes, searching for the man he had once known - the man who had accepted his ransom, who had fed him, who had treated him like a human being.

That man was gone.

Achilles looked down at Lycaon as if examining an insect. When he spoke, his voice was flat, emptied of all warmth.

"Idiot. Do not speak to me of ransom. Before Patroclus fell, I sold my captives alive. I was human then. But now - " He paused, as if the word itself had become strange to him. "Now not one Trojan shall live. Not one. Least of all a son of Priam."

Lycaon's hands fell from Achilles's knees. He held them out, empty, defenseless.

"Patroclus fell," Achilles went on, "and he was a better man than you will ever be. I too am greater than you, and yet death waits for me as well. Do you think you deserve to live when the best of us lies dead?"

Lycaon said nothing. What was there to say? He closed his eyes.

Achilles struck. He caught the young prince by the foot and flung him into the river, where the current carried him away, spinning slowly in the reddened water.

"Lie there among the fishes," Achilles called after him. "Your mother will not lay you on a bier. The river will bear you to the sea. So perish every Trojan, until I have paid the full price for Patroclus."

But the river was listening.

Scamander had had enough.

The river god rose from his waters, his voice booming across the battlefield. "Achilles! Even if you are mightier than all men, you are also the most ruthless! My waters are choked with corpses. I cannot find a channel to the sea. Drive your Trojans onto the plain and kill them there - but stop filling my stream with the dead."

"I will not stop, Scamander," Achilles answered, "not until I have driven them into their city and faced Hector. That is my fate."

He sprang back into the water, killing still. The river god roared. A great wave rose up, higher than a city wall, and crashed down upon Achilles. He grasped at an elm tree; it tore from the earth by its roots. He stumbled, fell, struggled to his feet as the water dragged at his legs. Another wave came. The river was trying to drown him.

"Father Zeus!" Achilles cried. "Is there no god who will pity me? Must I die like a swineherd's boy, swept away in a flood? I thought I would fall beneath the walls of Troy, killed by a hero's hand - not washed away like refuse!"

Poseidon and Athena heard him. They came in the shape of two mortal men and took his hands.

"Do not fear," Poseidon said. "We are gods, sent by Zeus to stand with you. It is not your fate to drown. Hear our counsel: do not stop fighting until you have penned the Trojans within their walls and killed Hector. Then return to the ships. We promise you victory."

They vanished. But Scamander was not finished. He called to his brother river Simois (SIM- oh-is): "Help me! Unite your waters with mine! This man will sack the city if we do not stop him!"

Another wave rose, higher than the last, foaming with blood and corpses. It towered over Achilles, ready to bury him.

Then Hera called to her son. "Hephaestus! The river attacks your favourite! Burn him!"

Fire burst from the plain. Hephaestus kindled a blaze that swept across the battlefield, drying the floodwaters, burning the dead where they lay. It caught the trees: elm, willow, tamarisk, lotus - all blazing like torches. The eels and fishes leaped and died in the boiling water. Scamander himself began to steam.

"Hephaestus!" the river god cried. "No god can stand against your flames! I yield! Let Achilles drive the Trojans from my banks!"

Hera heard the river's surrender. "Enough, my son. We should not burn an immortal god for the sake of mortals."

Hephaestus quenched his flames. Scamander sank back into his bed, scalded and humbled. The waters ran clear again, though the banks still smoked.

But where gods clash, nothing ends quietly.

Ares charged at Athena, his spear leveled. "Vixen! You set Diomedes on me once, and wounded me yourself. Now pay for it!"

He struck her aegis. Athena staggered back, seized a boulder that two men could not have lifted, and brought it down on Ares's neck. The god of war fell flat on his back, covering nine rods of ground, his armour clattering around him like dropped pans. Athena laughed. "Fool. Have you still not learned how much stronger I am?"

Aphrodite led the groaning Ares away. Athena pursued her, struck her on the breast, and sent her sprawling in the dust beside her lover. The two Trojan gods lay tangled together in the dirt, while the grey-eyed goddess stood over them triumphant.

Poseidon challenged Apollo. "Why do we hold back? Let us fight!"

Apollo shook his head. "I will not raise my hand against my uncle. There is no honour in battling you for the sake of miserable mortals who bloom like leaves and fall."

Artemis mocked him for his cowardice, but Hera heard her. The queen of gods seized the huntress by both wrists, took her own bow from her shoulders, and beat her about the ears with it. Artemis squirmed and writhed like a dove escaping a falcon, her arrows scattering in the dust, weeping as she fled towards Olympus.

Hermes would not even consider fighting Leto. "It is madness," he said, "to come to blows with one of Zeus's wives."

Zeus watched it all from his throne, and he laughed. The gods fighting each other like children in a schoolyard! But even his laughter could not drown out the sound of Achilles's voice, rising from the battlefield below, calling for more Trojans to kill.

The greatest warrior in the world was still not satisfied. He had slaughtered a riverful of men. He had burned a god. And still he wanted more.

Victim	Identity	Notable Detail
Iphition	Son of Otrynteus	Skull split by Pelian spear
Demoleon	Son of Antenor	Spear through the temple
Hippodamas	Trojan warrior	Fell like a sacrificial bull
Polydorus	Youngest son of Priam	Killed despite father's prohibition
Dryops	Son of Priam	Slew at his feet
Tros	Young Trojan	Begged for mercy; killed pleading
Mulius	Ally/fighter	Spear through both ears
Deucalion	Trojan champion	Head severed, helmet and all
Rhigmus	Thracian prince	Belly wound in chariot
Lycaon	Son of Priam	Begged for mercy; flung into river
Asteropaeus	Paeonian prince, son of a river god	Dual spears; killed after struggle

FOOTNOTES

The river Scamander in history and archaeology: The Scamander, modern Karamenderes, was the principal river of the Trojan plain. Excavations at Troy (Hisarlik) have confirmed that the ancient coastline and riverbeds were significantly different from today's; in Homer's era, the Scamander flowed much closer to the city than it does now. The river battle in Book 21 combines genuine topography with mythological imagination in a way that has fascinated geographers and literary scholars for generations.

Supplication (hiketeia) in Greek culture: When Lycaon clasps Achilles's knees, he performs hiketeia, the ritual of supplication sacred in ancient Greece. To refuse a suppliant was not merely cruel; it was an offense against Zeus himself. Achilles's rejection is therefore not just a character moment - it is a theological transgression. He has placed his private grief above the laws that bind even enemies together. This is the moment when Achilles crosses a line from hero to something more frightening: a man who recognizes no law but his own rage.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Achilles kills Lycaon even though Lycaon reminds him of their past connection and clasps his knees in supplication. What has changed in Achilles since the beginning of the poem? Would the Achilles of Chapter 1 have done this?

The river Scamander rises against Achilles because his slaughter has become excessive even by the standards of war. What does it mean when nature itself rebels against a human being?

The gods' battle is almost slapstick - Athena knocking Ares down with a rock, Hera beating Artemis with her own bow. Why does Homer include this comic scene right after

the darkest moment of Achilles's rampage? What effect does the contrast have on you as a reader?

CHAPTER 20: THE GODS THEMSELVES FIGHT

Zeus sat on his throne and laughed.

He watched Athena knock Ares flat with a boulder. He watched Hera beat Artemis with her own bow. He watched Aphrodite sprawl in the dust, her divine robes filthy, her hair tangled with grime. The king of gods threw back his head and roared with amusement. The halls of Olympus shook with it.

Was this not absurd? Immortal beings, eternal and all powerful, squabbling in the dirt like children fighting over a toy. They had chosen sides in a human war, and now they were punching each other over it. Zeus found the whole thing magnificent.

But laughter, like battle, cannot last forever. Zeus grew tired of the spectacle. He sent Iris, his swift-footed messenger, to call them all back.

"Enough," he said when they stood before him, some nursing bruised pride, others wearing smug grins. "Return to Olympus. No more fighting among yourselves. Apollo, go to Troy. Protect the city until Achilles's fury has run its course. The rest of you - stay here. I will not have my family brawling like fishwives while the world watches."

The gods obeyed. Even those who longed to rejoin the fray knew better than to defy Zeus when he spoke in that tone. They drifted back to their golden palaces. Athena polished her aegis. Ares limped to his healing couch. Artemis wept on her father's knee while Hera smiled from across the hall. Aphrodite straightened her robes and tried to pretend she had not been humiliated.

Order was restored on Olympus. What happened on earth was another matter.

Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) stood on the riverbank, alone. The fire of Hephaestus had died. The waters of Scamander ran clear once more. The Trojans who had not drowned were fleeing across the plain towards their city, and he let them go. His mind had room for only one thing now.

Hector.

He mounted his chariot. Automedon shook the reins. The immortal horses, Xanthus and Balios, knew their master's mind before he spoke it. They flew across the plain like storm winds racing over wheat, and the Greeks who saw them pass cheered and followed.

But Apollo was already moving.

The god slipped through the Scaean (SKAY-an) Gates as the Trojans poured inside, and found Agenor (ah-JEN-or), son of Antenor, valiant and noble. He put courage into the man's heart and stood beside him, veiled in darkness, lending him strength.

Agenor watched Achilles come on like a falling star, blazing across the plain, and his heart quailed. He thought of running. He thought of hiding in the woods of Ida, of washing the sweat from his body in the river and slipping back into the city at dusk. But pride held him where he was.

"If I flee," he told himself, "Achilles will catch me anyway. And what will they say of me then? Agenor the coward, who ran from the man who killed his friends? No. Better to stand. His flesh can be pierced. He is mortal, whatever the gods have given him."

He stepped out from the shadow of the wall and cast his spear.

It struck Achilles on the leg, below the knee. The greave of new-wrought tin rang like a bell, but the spear glanced off, turned by the divine gift. Achilles snarled and sprang at him.

Apollo intervened. He caught Agenor up in a thick mist and sent him walking into the city, untouched and unseen. Then the god did something clever, something only Apollo would think of. He took Agenor's shape, Agenor's voice, Agenor's very gait, and ran from Achilles across the plain.

Achilles gave chase. He had waited so long, killed so many, burned a river. And now, at last, he had a Trojan prince in his sights, fleeing before him. He poured everything into the pursuit. His legs, divinely swift, ate up the ground. His eyes saw nothing but the shape ahead of him.

He did not see the real Trojans streaming through the Scaean Gates behind him. He did not see Priam on the wall, ordering the great doors thrown wide, then commanding them sealed the moment the last of his people were safe. He did not see the city close itself like a fist.

He saw only Apollo's phantom, always just out of reach.

Apollo ran easily. He could have outdistanced Achilles without effort. But he did not. He stayed close enough to keep hope alive, far enough to keep capture impossible. He led Achilles towards the deep waters of the Scamander, away from the walls, away from the gates, away from Hector.

At last, when the city was secure and the last Trojan safe inside, Apollo stopped. He turned. The shape of Agenor fell away like a discarded cloak, and the god stood revealed in all his radiant beauty - tall, luminous, terrible in his calm.

"Why do you pursue me, son of Peleus?" Apollo asked. "You are a mortal, and I am immortal. Have you not yet learned the difference? You cannot kill what death cannot touch."

Achilles pulled up short, his chest heaving, his hands shaking with spent fury. The realization crashed over him like cold water. He had been tricked. The Trojans were inside the walls. Hector was behind stone and timber. And he stood in the middle of an empty field, chasing a god who had been playing with him.

"You have robbed me of glory, Far-Darter!" he shouted. "You drew me away while they escaped! I would have had them. I would have had him!"

Apollo made no answer. He simply vanished, returning to the walls of Troy to stand guard over the city he loved. Achilles was left standing in the dust, alone with his rage and the sound of his own breathing.

He turned back towards the city. The plain was empty. The battle was over. The sun hung low, painting the walls of Troy in shades of gold and blood. And there, before the Scaean Gates, a single figure waited.

Inside the city, Priam (PRYE-am) had watched it all from the highest tower. He had seen his people stream through the gates like water through a broken dam - exhausted, thirsty, terrified. He had ordered the gates kept open until the last man was inside, knowing that every moment they stood ajar was a moment Achilles might force his way through.

"Close them," he had commanded when the plain was clear. "Bar them. Seal them tight."

Now he looked down and saw Hector standing alone before the walls, his shield propped against a tower, his spear in his hand, facing the plain where Achilles walked like death itself.

The old king's heart broke in his chest. He rushed along the wall to the gate tower, his attendants following, weeping.

"Hector!" he cried, his voice cracking. "My son! Do not face that man alone! He is mightier than you. The gods favour him, and he has the armour of Hephaestus on his shoulders. Come inside the walls. Live to defend your city another day. Think of your mother. Think of your wife. Think of your child!"

He tore at his grey hair. He stretched his arms towards his son across the distance that separated them, an old man begging a younger one to be wise.

"I have lost so many sons," Priam went on, his voice breaking. "Lycaon and Polydorus, I know now they are dead. Do not make me bury another. An old man's death is the most pitiable thing in the world: dogs at the gates, strangers in the house, everything he built undone. But a young man's death - at least that has honour. Do not rob me of your life, Hector. Come inside. Please."

Beside him, Hecuba (heh-KYOO-buh) wept. She bared her breast before the watching soldiers, the breast that had nursed him, and held it out towards the son who would not look at her.

"Hector!" she cried. "My son! Honour this breast that fed you. Have pity on me. If you die out there, who will mourn me when I am old? Who will bury me? The dogs will eat you at the Greek ships, and I will never wash your body or lay you on the pyre. Do not make me childless. Do not make your wife a widow. Come inside."

Her voice carried across the space between them, raw with love and terror. Every Trojan on the wall heard her. Every Trojan wept with her.

But Hector did not move.

He stood with his shield against the tower and his spear in his hand, and he watched Achilles coming closer with every heartbeat. The figure on the plain grew larger, shining in the dying light, burning like a star fallen to earth.

Hector's heart beat fast. But his feet did not turn towards the gate.

Inside, the city held its breath. The Trojans who had fled from the plain now pressed against the walls, peering through gaps, watching their champion stand alone against the man who had slaughtered a river. The women clutched their children. The old men shook their heads. The soldiers gripped their spears and wished they were outside with him, and were glad they were not.

Achilles walked on. He was in no hurry now. The quarry had stopped running. The fox had gone to ground, and only one hound remained outside the hole.

He could see Hector clearly now. He could see the familiar armour. It was his armour, the armour Patroclus had worn, the armour Hector had stripped from his friend's dead body. The sight of it

stoked the furnace of his rage to white heat.

"There you are," Achilles whispered to himself. "There you are at last."

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The divine battle in Book 21, what scholars call the theomachy, is one of the strangest and most delightful passages in the Iliad. After twenty books of bloodshed and horror, Homer suddenly gives us divine slapstick: Athena knocks Ares unconscious with a rock, Hera beats Artemis with her own bow, Aphrodite sprawls in the dirt. Why? Greek epic had a tradition of *xenia* - the sacred duty of hospitality - and the gods were expected to maintain decorum even towards their enemies. But here, all pretense of divine dignity collapses. Some readers find the scene jarring. Others see it as Homer's genius: after showing us the worst of human nature in Achilles's slaughter, he shows us the gods at their most childish, and the contrast is devastating. If even immortals behave

like squabbling children, what hope is there for mortals? And yet the comedy also provides relief - a moment to breathe before the greatest tragedy in Western literature unfolds.

FOOTNOTES

Divine deception in the Iliad: Apollo's trick, leading Achilles away by taking Agenor's shape, is one of several instances in the Iliad where gods deceive mortals through disguise. Athena does it constantly, appearing as old friends, relatives, or strangers to nudge heroes towards their fate. Apollo's deception here is unusual because it serves not to advance Achilles's doom but to delay it. The god is buying time for the Trojans, not fulfilling destiny. This distinction matters: in the Iliad, divine deception can be either an instrument of fate or a temporary reprieve from it. Apollo's trick is the latter. He knows he cannot save Hector forever. He is simply postponing the inevitable.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The gods' battle is comic and almost petty. They squabble, they hit each other, they cry. Why do you think Homer shows the gods behaving this way? Does it make them more relatable, or does it diminish them in your eyes?

Apollo deceives Achilles to save the Trojans, and Achilles is furious when he realizes he's been tricked. Have you ever been so focused on one goal that you failed to see what was really happening around you? What did you learn from that experience?

Priam and Hecuba beg Hector to come inside, using every argument they can think of: duty to his parents, love for his wife, care for his child. Hector stays outside anyway. Is he being brave, foolish, or both? What would you have done in his place?

CHAPTER 21: THE DEATH OF HECTOR

Hector (HEK-tor) stood alone.

The Scaean (SKAY-an) Gates were closed behind him. The great bars of oak and bronze had slid into place, sealing him out of the city he had spent his life defending. Inside, his father wept on the wall. Inside, his mother tore at her hair. Inside, his wife waited at her loom, unaware that the world

was about to end.

Hector leaned his shield against a jutting tower and watched Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) come.

The Greek champion walked across the plain like a figure from a nightmare. The armour of Hephaestus caught the late sun and threw it back in blinding bronze and gold. The Pelian spear swung easy at his side.

Hector's mouth went dry. His heart hammered against his ribs. He thought of running inside, of hammering on the gates. He thought of Polydamas (pol-ee-DAM-as), who had urged him to retreat, and heard the accusations: Hector ruined us by his pride. Hector thought he could face Achilles. Hector was wrong.

He thought of laying down his arms, offering to return Helen and all her treasure. But he knew with a certainty like lead that Achilles would not listen. There was no treaty with a man who had burned a river.

"Better to fight him," Hector said to himself, "and die gloriously. Or better still: to kill him, and save my city."

But his feet would not move. And Achilles kept coming.

Fear seized Hector like a hand around his throat.

He turned and ran. Not towards the gates - he could not bear the shame - but along the wagon road beneath the wall, past the wild fig tree, past the two springs where Trojan women had washed their clothes in peacetime. He passed them without seeing them, because death was at his heels.

Achilles ran after him. The gap narrowed with every stride. Hector tried to cut towards the city, hoping for arrows from the walls, but Achilles headed him off, herding him away from the gates. Three times they circled the city, their feet raising dust that hung in the air like a veil. The Trojans watched in silence. The Greeks held their breath.

On Olympus, Zeus took out his golden scales. In one pan: the doom of Achilles. In the other: the doom of Hector. The pan of Hector sank towards the house of Hades like a stone through deep water.

Apollo, who had lent Hector speed, withdrew. He turned his face away. He had done what he could.

Then Athena descended.

She came not in her own form, but wearing the face of Deiphobus (dee-IF-oh-bus), Hector's brother, the one he trusted most among Priam's sons. She ran up beside him, breathing hard as if she too had run from the gates.

"Brother," she said, "I could not stay inside. Father begged me. Mother begged me. But I came. Let us stand together."

Hector's heart leaped. He was not alone.

He stopped running. He turned to face Achilles, who approached with spear lowered, eyes burning.

"Son of Peleus," Hector called out, and his voice was steady again, though his hands trembled. "I will run from you no longer. But let us swear a covenant before we fight. If Zeus grants me the victory, I will not desecrate your body. I will strip your armour, yes, but I will give your corpse to the Greeks for proper burial. Promise me the same."

Achilles stopped ten paces away. He looked at Hector as if he had spoken in a language he did not understand.

"Covenants?" he said softly. Then louder: "There are no covenants between lions and men. Between wolves and sheep. You killed Patroclus. You stripped his armour. You wore it. And now you stand in my armour and ask me for mercy?"

He drew back his spear. "Fight, Hector. Fight with everything you have. It will not be enough."

Round	Action	Result
1	Hector hurls his spear at Achilles	Athena deflects it; the spear falls

harmless at Hector's feet

2	Hector calls to Deiphobus for a	No one answers; he realizes
second spear	Athena has deceived him	
3	Hector charges with his sword,	Achilles holds his ground, reading
resolved to die fighting	Hector's movements	
4	Achilles hurls the Pelian spear at	The spear pierces the only gap in
Hector's throat	the armour; Hector falls	

Hector knew he had no second spear. He had thrown his only one. He turned to Deiphobus, hand outstretched. "Brother! Your spear!"

Silence.

He looked again. The figure beside him was gone. Where Deiphobus had stood, there was only empty air and settling dust.

"The gods have lured me to my destruction," Hector whispered. "Athena. It was Athena all along. She took my brother's face and led me here like a lamb to the knife."

He looked up at Achilles, and for a moment, something like peace entered his eyes. "My doom has come," he said. "Let me not die without a struggle. Let me do some great thing that men will remember."

He drew his sword. The blade caught the light as he charged, gathering himself like an eagle diving from the clouds towards a lamb far below. He leaped at Achilles with everything he had left: all his love for Troy, all his fear for Andromache, all his pride as Priam's son, as the city's shield, as the man who had held the walls against the Greeks for nine long years.

Achilles watched him come. He had studied Hector's armour - his armour, the armour Patroclus had worn - and he knew every joint, every clasp, every weak point. He knew the throat, where the collar-bones met and the neck curved down into the shoulders. The one place the bronze did not cover.

He threw the Pelian spear.

It flew straight and true, and it struck Hector in the throat. The point punched through flesh and stopped before severing the windpipe. Hector fell headlong, his sword spinning from his hand, and the dust rose around him like a shroud.

He lay on his back in the dirt, blood bubbling at his lips, and stared up at the sky.

Achilles stood over him.

"Hector," he said, and the name was a curse. "You thought you could kill my friend and go unpunished. You stripped his armour. You strutted in it. Fool. I was always mightier than Patroclus. And now I have laid you low. The Greeks will bury him with honour. The dogs and vultures will have you."

Hector tried to speak. The blood in his throat choked him, but he forced the words out, one by one.

"By your life... and knees... and by your parents. Do not let the dogs... devour me at the ships. Take the treasure... my father will give you. Send my body home... that the Trojans may burn me... as I deserve."

Achilles knelt beside him. His face was inches from Hector's, and what Hector saw in those eyes was not victory. It was the absence of everything human.

"Dog," Achilles whispered. "Do not speak to me of knees or parents. Would that I could cut your flesh to pieces and eat it raw for what you have done. Nothing will save you. Not ten times your weight in gold. Not twenty. Your mother will never lay you out. The dogs will eat you."

Hector looked at him. The light was fading from his eyes, but he found the strength for one last breath.

"I know you now," he said. "I know what you are. I bring you no curse. But remember: Paris and Apollo... will slay you... at the Scaean Gates."

The shrouds of death enfolded him. His soul flew down to the house of Hades, lamenting its fate, leaving youth and strength behind.

Achilles knelt a moment longer. Then he rose, drew his spear from the body, and began stripping the armour from Hector's shoulders. The other Greeks ran up, and each one thrust his

spear into the dead man's flesh, saying: "Easier to handle him now than when he was throwing fire at our ships."

When Achilles had stripped the last piece of bronze, he did something that would haunt him. He pierced the tendons behind Hector's ankles, threaded rawhide thongs through the slits, and bound the body to his chariot, head dragging in the dust.

He lashed his horses forward. Xanthus and Balius leaped. The chariot surged across the plain, and Hector's dark hair spread in the dirt, and the head that Andromache had kissed a thousand times bounced and rolled across the ground he had died to defend.

The Trojans on the wall watched. They did not look away.

Inside the city, someone began a dirge. Then others joined, until the whole of Troy seemed to be one throat of grief. Priam groveled in the courtyard filth, begging his servants to let him go to the ships. Hecuba's cry rose above the rest, a sound not human, coming from somewhere deeper than language.

But Andromache (an-DROM-uh-kee) heard nothing yet.

She was at her loom in the inner room of the house, weaving a double purple cloth and embroidering it with flowers. She had told her maids to set a tripod on the fire, so that Hector would have warm water for his bath when he returned from battle. She imagined him walking through the door, tired but smiling, taking little Astyanax (a-STY-uh-naks) in his arms, telling her the Greeks had been driven back again.

Then the cry came from the wall. Not a battle cry. Something else.

The shuttle fell from her hands.

"Two of you," she said to her maids, and her voice sounded strange in her own ears, "come with me. I need to see what has happened. I heard Hecuba's voice. Something is wrong."

She stood. Her legs would not hold her. She fell, then rose again, and ran from the house like a woman possessed, her women following after. She pushed through the crowds on the wall, past sisters-in-law she did not see, past soldiers who reached out to steady her and could not catch her.

She reached the battlements and looked out.

She saw a chariot racing across the plain. She saw two immortal horses, their manes flying. She saw a body bound behind them, bouncing in the dust, leaving a trail in the dirt.

She saw Hector's hair.

The world went black. She fell backward into the arms of her women, the darkness of unconsciousness swallowing her whole. When she came to, she tore the headdress from her hair, the veil that golden Aphrodite had given her on her wedding day, the frontlet and net with its plaited band. She flung them all from the wall and screamed.

"Hector! Hector!"

The name echoed off the stones.

"We were born to share one fate, you in Priam's house and I in Thebes under wooded Placus, my father Eetion's home. Would that he had never begotten me. You are going to the house of Hades, under the secret places of the earth, and you leave me a sorrowing widow in your house. Our child is still an infant. You can do nothing for him now, nor he for you. Even if he escapes this war, his life

will be labour and sorrow. Others will seize his lands. The day that orphans a child severs him from his own kind. He will go about with his head bowed, his cheeks wet with tears, plucking one man by the cloak and another by the shirt, begging for pity. Some may hold out a cup to him for a moment. But then one whose parents still live will drive him away with blows and angry words: 'Out with you! You have no father here!' And the child will go crying back to his widowed mother. He, Astyanax, who used to sit on his father's knees and eat only the choicest morsels, who slept on a soft couch in his nurse's arms, knowing neither want nor care. Now his life will be full of hardship."

She stopped, gasping for breath, her face wet with tears.

"The worms will eat you at the ships, far from your parents, after the dogs have had their fill. You will lie naked, though in your house there is fine clothing made by women's hands. I will burn it all. It is no use to you now. You can never wear it again. And so I will give you what honour I can, though it is nothing against the dishonor of your death."

The women around her wept with her. But as Homer tells us, each woman wept for her own sorrows. They wept for husbands dead and brothers missing and sons who would not come home. Andromache wept for Hector. She wept for Astyanax. She wept for the life she had been promised and would never have.

The sun set over Troy. The chariot reached the Greek ships. And on the plain where Hector had fallen, where his blood had darkened the soil, the wind stirred the dust and carried it away, and nothing marked the place where the noblest man in Troy had died.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Hector's death in Book 22 is the climax not only of the Iliad but of one of the oldest and most powerful narrative traditions in Western literature: the tragic duel. Two champions, one noble, one mightier; divine deception; a fallen hero's dying words; the desecration of the body; the widow's lament. This structure became the template for countless tragedies in Greek drama, in Roman epic, and down through the Renaissance to

our own day. Shakespeare's Henry V borrows it. Milton's Samson Agonistes echoes it. But Homer did it first, and Homer did it with a simplicity that no later writer has ever quite matched. Hector does not die cursing. He does not die defiant. He dies knowing he has been betrayed by a god, knowing his wife will be a slave, knowing his son will be an orphan - and still he charges. That is the Iliad's definition of heroism: not winning, not even surviving, but choosing to fight when every other choice has been taken away.

FOOTNOTES

Hector's name and its meaning: The name Hector (Hektor) derives from the Greek verb ekhein, "to hold" or "to possess." In a very real sense, Hector's name is his function: he is the holder of Troy, the one who keeps the city together through the force of his own defence. When he dies, the city's hold on survival effectively dies with him. No other character in the Iliad has a name so perfectly matched to his role. Ancient audiences would have heard this resonance every time someone

called out to him.

Andromache's lament and the tradition of tragedy: Andromache's speech over Hector's body is the direct ancestor of the kommos, the lament chorus that became a defining feature of Greek tragedy. Euripides, writing three centuries after Homer, would make Andromache the protagonist of his own play *Andromache*, and her lament scene in the *Iliad* was clearly his model. The structure - the widow's shock, the prophecy of the child's suffering, the burning of the clothes, the contrast between past happiness and future grief - appears again and again in Greek and Roman funeral literature. Homer invented the template. Every tragic heroine who followed walked in Andromache's footsteps.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Athena deceives Hector by taking his brother's shape, leading him to believe he is not alone. When Hector discovers the truth, he says "The gods have lured me to my destruction" but still charges at Achilles. Is his decision to fight brave, or has despair simply replaced hope? Can a choice be heroic if it leads only to death?

Achilles refuses every request Hector makes, even the most basic: to return his body to his family for burial. Why has Achilles become so merciless? Is his rage justified, or has it consumed the man Patroclus loved?

Andromache imagines Astyanax's future in heartbreaking detail: the other children driving him away, his life of begging and sorrow. How does this vision of a child's suffering affect your understanding of the war? Who are the real victims of the Trojan War?

CHAPTER 22: THE FUNERAL OF PATROCLUS

Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) could not sleep.

After Hector had been killed and the Greeks returned to the ships, Achilles kept the Myrmidons together to mourn Patroclus. Three times they drove their chariots sorrowfully around Patroclus's body. Hector's corpse lay nearby in the dust, but Patroclus had not yet received the funeral rites his spirit required.

That night Achilles lay grieving by the shore. As he slept, Patroclus's ghost came to him in a dream, hovering over his head like breath on winter air. "You sleep, and have forgotten me," the spirit said. "Bury me with all speed, that I may pass the gates of Hades. The ghosts drive me away. I wander desolate by the wide gates of the house of the dead." The spirit paused, and its voice softened. "Give me your hand, Achilles. Never again will we sit apart and take sweet counsel among the living. When you too come to the house of Hades, let our bones lie together in the golden urn your mother gave you." Achilles had reached for him, but his arms closed on nothing. The ghost vanished like smoke, gibbering as it went, and Achilles woke with tears already on his face. He sat up in the darkness, his heart pounding, and called out to the Myrmidons around him. "Even in death he came to me. Even there he remembers our friendship."

It was time to build the pyre.

The Greeks came in their thousands, carrying axes and ropes, led by Meriones (mer-ee-OH- neez), squire to Idomeneus (eye-DOM-eh-nee-us). They climbed the slopes of Mount Ida and laid their axes to the roots of ancient oaks. The trees came crashing down, a sound like thunder rolling across the plain. They split the trunks, bound them behind mules, and hauled them to the beach where Achilles waited. The pile grew until it was a hundred feet in every direction, a small city of wood, and the Greeks stood around it in a great circle, their faces orange with reflected firelight.

When the pyre was ready, the Myrmidons brought Patroclus's body. They covered him with locks of their own hair, cut short and thrown upon his corpse. Achilles stood last with the long yellow lock he had grown for the river Spercheius, a vow to his father never to be fulfilled. "I will not see my home again," he said, and laid the lock in his friend's dead hands.

Then he did something that made the oldest Greeks turn away.

He took twelve Trojan captives (sons of noble houses, some barely older than boys) and cut their throats upon the pyre. He did it without ceremony, without prayer, his face empty of everything except the rage that had swallowed him whole. The Greeks watched in silence. They had seen Achilles brave. They had seen him terrible. They had never seen him monstrous.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Homer's original audience would have understood the sacrifice of captives at a funeral as a horrifying but recognizable act of extreme grief. In Bronze Age warrior culture, the death of a great man was sometimes "paid for" with the lives of others. But Homer does not present this uncritically. Achilles's killing of the twelve captives is the moment where his grief crosses into inhumanity, the very quality he accused Hector of lacking. The poet wants us to feel the shock of it. When Euripides wrote his play *Hecuba* four centuries later, he made the sacrifice of Polyxena at Achilles's tomb its central horror, suggesting that Greek audiences continued to wrestle with this scene long after Homer's time.

The pyre would not light. Achilles prayed to the winds Boreas (BOR-ee-as) and Zephyrus (ZEF-er-us), and swift-footed Iris (EYE-ris) carried his prayer to them. They came howling across the sea, and the flames roared up so high they seemed to touch the sky. All night the winds blew, and all night Achilles stood by the pyre with a golden cup in his hands, pouring wine onto the ground and calling Patroclus's name until the earth was drenched. As a father mourns when he burns the bones of his son, so Achilles mourned, pacing round the bier with groans that rose from somewhere deeper than his chest.

At dawn, they gathered the whitened bones from the ashes and placed them in a golden urn, cushioned in two layers of fat. They covered the urn with a linen cloth and carried it inside Achilles's tent. Then they heaped earth over the place where the fire had burned, raising a mound that would grow higher in years to come. Achilles stood before it and made a promise. "When I too am dead, let them lay my bones beside yours, Patroclus. Not even in the house of Hades will I be parted from you." The Greeks who heard him wept. They knew his death was coming soon.

But grief, however deep, cannot burn forever. The Greeks needed to remember they were alive.

So Achilles brought out prizes from his ships: cauldrons, tripods, horses, mules, oxen, women skilled in crafts, and bars of iron. He stood before the assembled army and announced the funeral

games in honour of Patroclus. The crowd stirred. For the first time in days, someone laughed. Someone else made a wager. The business of living had begun again.

Event	Winner	Notable Moment
Chariot Race	Diomedes (dy-oh-MEE-deez)	Athena smashed Eumelus (yoo-

MEE-lus)'s chariot; Antilochus (an-TIL-oh-kus) nearly caused a riot with his reckless driving

Boxing	Epeius (eh-PAY-us)	Knocked Euryalus (yoo-RYE-a-lus)
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out cold with a single blow to the jaw

Wrestling	Ajax and Odysseus	Declared a draw after neither could
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throw the other

Footrace	Odysseus	Athena tripped Ajax Oileus (oh-IL-
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ee-us) in cow dung; the army roared with laughter

Armed Combat	Diomedes	Fought Ajax the Great to a
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standstill; Achilles stopped the match

Archery	Meriones	Shot a dove through the wing after
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Teucer (TYOO-ser) only severed its tether

Spear-Throwing	Agamemnon	Won by default - Achilles declared
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no one could beat him

The chariot race was the main event. Five drivers lined up: Eumelus son of Admetus (ad- MEE-tus), Diomedes, Menelaus (men-eh-LAY-us), Antilochus son of Nestor (NES-tor), and Meriones. Achilles's own horses stood weeping on the sidelines. Their driver was dead, and they would not race for anyone else.

At the signal, the horses surged forward. Eumelus took an early lead, his mares flying across the plain. But Athena had taken an interest. When Apollo made Diomedes drop his whip, Athena

returned it and breathed fresh strength into his Trojan stallions. Then, in a flash of divine spite, she shattered Eumelus's chariot yoke. The mares veered in opposite directions. Eumelus was thrown, his elbows and mouth torn, his chariot splintered.

Diomedes swept past to victory, his horses stepping high, his chariot inlaid with gold and tin gleaming in the sun.

But the real drama was behind him. Antilochus, driving slower horses but possessed of more nerve than sense, had been listening to his father's advice. Nestor had told him: skill beats speed. When the road narrowed where winter rains had worn a groove, Antilochus saw his chance. He cut inside Menelaus, forcing him to rein back or risk a collision.

"You reckless fool!" Menelaus shouted. "The road's too narrow!"

Antilochus pretended not to hear. He took second place by a trick, and when Menelaus came in barely a horse-length behind, the Spartan king was furious. He confronted Antilochus before the whole army, demanding he swear he had not fouled him deliberately. Antilochus, young, charming, and impossible to stay angry at, apologized with such grace that Menelaus found himself giving back the prize mare he had claimed. "Your good father and your brother have had infinite trouble on my behalf," Menelaus said, half-smiling despite himself. "I yield to your entreaty."

The fifth prize, a two-handled urn, went unclaimed. Achilles gave it to Nestor, who accepted it with a speech about his youth that lasted long enough for several people to sit down. "In those days," Nestor said, and the younger men smiled at each other, "I was eminent among heroes."

The boxing was short and brutal. Epeius, the same Epeius who would one day build the Trojan Horse, announced that he would break the bones of anyone who faced him. Only

Euryalus was foolish enough to try. Epeius hit him on the jaw, and Euryalus went down like a fish flipped onto a shore. His friends dragged him from the ring, spitting blood and seeing double.

The wrestling matched Ajax the Great against Odysseus. They gripped each other like roof-beams in a storm, their backs cracking, sweat pouring from them in streams. Ajax lifted Odysseus clear of the ground, but Odysseus (never forgetting his cunning) kicked Ajax behind the knee and brought him down. They fell together, covered in dust, and Achilles declared it a draw. Each took an equal prize.

The footrace was pure comedy. Ajax Oileus led until the final stretch, when Athena, answering Odysseus's prayer, made him slip on a pile of cow dung left from the morning's sacrifices. He went down face-first, his mouth filled with what no runner wishes to encounter, and the army's laughter echoed across the plain. Odysseus took the silver mixing-bowl. Ajax took the ox and stood spitting, while Antilochus, ever the diplomat, complimented his elders and earned an extra half-talent of gold from Achilles.

The archery contest pitted Teucer against Meriones. A pigeon was tied by the foot to the top of a ship's mast. Teucer shot first and severed the string, setting the bird free. It was a magnificent shot, but not what the contest required. Meriones, who had had his arrow ready while Teucer

aimed, snatched the bow, prayed to Apollo, and sent his shaft through the dove's wing as it circled upward. The bird fell dead at his feet. He collected ten double-edged axes and the army's applause.

For the spear-throwing, Agamemnon stepped forward alongside Meriones. But Achilles stopped them. "Son of Atreus, we know how far you excel all others. Take the cauldron. Give the spear to Meriones." It was flattery, and everyone knew it, and Agamemnon accepted it with the easy smile of a man who has been given a prize he did not have to earn.

The games ended as the sun touched the western sea. The Greeks dispersed to their ships, still arguing about the chariot race, still laughing about Ajax and the cow dung, still alive with the noise of human fellowship. Somewhere in the crowd, old Phoenix had fallen asleep during Nestor's speech and had to be woken by his neighbors. Two men who had quarreled over a wager were bought drinks by a third man who thought the whole thing hilarious. The Myrmidons, who had been silent since Patroclus's death, were heard singing again.

Achilles watched them go. For a few hours, he had almost felt like himself again. He remembered the young prince who had once competed for sport, who had once laughed at Nestor's speeches, who had once had a friend sitting beside him sharing a cup of wine and talking nonsense about home. The grief was still there, a stone in his chest that would never dissolve. But for a moment, he had been among the living. He had heard laughter and

remembered that it existed. He had seen young men argue over a prize and remembered that some competitions end without death.

Then the last voices faded. The plain grew quiet. The sun slipped below the sea, and the first stars pricked the darkening sky.

Achilles turned back to his tent. And there, laid on the ground outside, was Hector's body. Still fresh. Still whole, because Apollo would not let it decay. Still bound for dragging.

Achilles looked at it for a long moment. Something flickered in his eyes, something that might have been doubt. Then it was gone, swallowed by the familiar darkness.

He called for his chariot.

The games had been a moment of light. But the darkness in Achilles was not finished yet.

FOOTNOTES

The funeral games in historical context: Athletic contests at funerals were a well-established tradition in ancient Greece, persisting from the Bronze Age right through to classical times. The Iliad's games in Book 23 became the literary template for all such scenes. Virgil imitated them in the Aeneid when describing the funeral games for Anchises, and they influenced the tradition of Olympic-style competition as a form of memorial. The mixture of solemnity and comedy (Ajax slipping in cow dung, Nestor's endless speech) is characteristically Homeric: grief and laughter sit side by side, as they do in real life.

Achilles and the Trojan captives: The sacrifice of the twelve Trojan prisoners is one of the most debated passages in the Iliad. Some scholars argue it represents an older, darker layer of Bronze Age tradition that Homer included but did not endorse. Others note that it is carefully positioned to show us what Achilles has become: the same man who once showed mercy to the captive Briseis (BRYE-sis) now kills prisoners without thought. The narrative does not ask us to approve. It asks us to witness what unending rage does to a human soul.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The funeral games are full of quarrels, tricks, and laughter - ordinary human behavior in the midst of extraordinary grief. Why do you think Homer includes so much comedy and competition in this scene? What does it tell us about how people cope with loss?

Achilles's sacrifice of the twelve Trojan captives is presented as the moment where his grief becomes monstrous. Does Achilles still deserve our sympathy after this act? Can you understand why he does it while still recognizing it as wrong?

Antilochus uses a reckless trick to pass Menelaus in the chariot race, then apologizes so gracefully that Menelaus gives back the prize. What does this scene say about honour, competition, and the art of the apology?

CHAPTER 23: TWELVE DAYS OF DESECRATION

Twelve times the sun rose over the Greek ships, and twelve times Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) yoked his immortal horses and dragged Hector (HEK-tor)'s body around the tomb of Patroclus. Three circles each dawn, the heels cutting troughs in the dust, and each day Achilles returned to his tent a little more hollow, a little less human.

But the body would not decay.

Apollo (ah-POL-oh) had stretched his golden aegis over Hector's corpse like a shield against the world. He anointed the dead man's flesh with ambrosial oil of roses, and sent a dark cloud from heaven to earth so the sun could not parch the skin. Where Achilles dragged him through stones and thorns, Apollo smoothed the way. Where dust should have crusted the wounds, the god washed them clean. It was as if Hector lay sleeping beneath a sheet of gold, untouched by time, untouched by rage.

The gods watched from Olympus, and their patience frayed.

On the twelfth morning, Apollo stood among them and spoke with unaccustomed fire. "You ought to be ashamed," he said. "Did not Hector burn thigh-bones of heifers and unblemished goats on your altars? Did he not honour you all his life? And now you let his body be desecrated because you fear one angry man?"

He turned to address them all, his voice ringing through the golden hall. "Achilles has flung aside all pity. He is like a lion that springs upon flocks and gorges without measure. A man may lose a son, a brother, yet when he has mourned, he lets the dead lie. Achilles drags a noble man behind his chariot. It is not right. It is not worthy of a hero."

Hera (HEER-ah) rose to her feet, her eyes hard as flint. "This would be well, O lord of the silver bow, if you gave equal honour to Hector and to Achilles. But Hector was mortal. He suckled at a woman's breast. Achilles is the son of a goddess, Thetis (THEE-tis), whom I myself reared and raised. I married her to Peleus (PEE-lee-us). You feasted at their wedding yourself. Do not now pretend that all men are equal in our eyes. They never have been."

The hall fell silent. This was the old argument, the one that had started the war.

Then Zeus (ZEEWS) spoke. His voice was not loud, but it carried the weight of thunder. "Enough. Their honour shall not be equal. Hector was mortal, Achilles is half-divine. But of

all who dwelt in Troy, Hector was dearest to us. His offerings never failed. Never was my altar stinted of its dues. I will permit the body to be ransomed."

He looked around at the assembled gods. Apollo nodded, satisfied. Hera turned away, her lips pressed thin. The other gods murmured among themselves, some agreeing, some dissenting, all of them aware that something was shifting. A decision had been made on Olympus. What remained was to make it real on earth.

Zeus's gaze settled on Iris, fleet as the wind, who stood waiting at the threshold. "Go, Iris. Find Thetis in her sea-cave and bring her to me. And then go to Priam in Troy. Tell him he is to come to the ships of the Achaeans, alone but for a single servant to drive his wagon. Tell him he need not fear death. We will send Hermes (HER-meez) to guide him through the enemy camp."

God	Position	Argument
Apollo	For returning the body	Hector was pious and honoured

the gods; Achilles has become

savage and pitiless

Hera	Against returning the body	Achilles is her ward through Thetis;
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Hector was merely mortal

Zeus	Decides in favour of ransom	Hector was dearest of all Trojans,
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but Achilles must be commanded

through Thetis

Athena	Silent (supports Achilles)	Her deception of Hector led to his
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death; she does not speak against

her mother Hera

Hermes	Neutral (assigned as guide)	Will escort Priam safely through
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the Greek lines regardless of divine

politics

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The divine council in Book 24 is the last of several such assemblies in the Iliad, and it reveals how profoundly the gods have been divided by the war. Apollo's passionate defence of Hector is striking because Apollo himself helped engineer Hector's death. He withdrew his protection at the crucial moment. But the god draws a sharp distinction between killing a man in fair battle and desecrating his corpse. For Apollo, the second act is worse than the first. Hera's counter-argument is equally revealing: she does not deny that Hector was noble, only that his nobility matters as much as Achilles's divine blood. The Iliad never pretends that the gods are fair. It only shows us what happens when immortal favour is granted and withdrawn.

Iris found Thetis sitting in her sea-cave, surrounded by her sister Nereids, weeping for her son who was doomed to die young. "Rise, Thetis," Iris said. "Zeus commands your presence."

Thetis rose. She wrapped her darkest veil around her shoulders, the colour of deep water at midnight, and followed Iris up through the waves to Olympus. Athena gave up her seat. Hera placed a golden cup in her hand and spoke words of comfort. Then Zeus told her his plan.

"Go to your son," the king of gods said. "Tell him the gods are angry. Tell him I myself am angriest of all. He is to accept a ransom from Priam and give up the body."

Thetis found Achilles sitting outside his tent, staring at the sea. His face was gaunt. He had not eaten properly in days, and his eyes had the hollow look of a man who has stared too long into something that stares back. She sat beside him and took his hand, the same hand that had killed Hector, the same hand that dragged a dead man's body each dawn, and she told him what Zeus commanded.

Achilles listened. For a long moment he said nothing. The waves broke on the shore, and the gulls cried overhead, and somewhere in the camp a man was laughing at a joke. The sound of laughter seemed strange to Achilles, as if it came from a language he had once known but forgotten.

"So be it," he said at last. "If Olympian Zeus commands it, I will obey. Let Priam bring his ransom. Let him bear the body away."

It was the first time in twelve days that anything like reason had entered his voice.

Meanwhile, Iris reached Troy.

She found Priam (PRYE-am) in his courtyard, surrounded by sons who sat with their clothes wet from tears. The old king was wrapped in a filthy mantle, his head and neck still crusted with the mire he had groveled in when Hector died. He looked like a ruined thing, a man who had already died but forgotten to lie down.

Iris approached him softly. "Take heart, Priam. I bring no evil tidings. Zeus pities you. He commands you to go to the ships of the Achaeans and ransom your son. Take gifts that will satisfy Achilles. Go alone, with only a servant to drive your wagon. You need not fear death. Hermes will escort you, and Achilles will not harm a suppliant. It is the sacred law."

Then she was gone, a shimmer of light across the stones.

Priam stood slowly. For the first time in twelve days, something moved in his eyes besides grief. Purpose.

He called to his sons to ready a mule-wagon. Then he went down to his cedar-wood store- room, where his treasures lay in chests of polished bronze. Hecuba (heh-KYOO-bah) found him there, counting out gold into a leather bag.

"Husband," she said, and her voice cracked. "What has become of your judgment? You are famous for wisdom. Strangers praise it, your own people depend on it. How can you go alone to the ships? If Achilles sees you, he will know neither respect nor pity. He has slain so many of your sons. What makes you think he will spare the father?"

She gripped his arm. "Let us weep Hector here, in our own house. The threads of fate were spun for him at birth. Dogs will eat his flesh far from his parents. This we know. Do not make yourself another corpse for the Greeks to desecrate."

Priam looked at her. He was old, older than the war, older than many of the walls of Troy. But in that moment, something harder than age settled in his face. "Wife," he said gently, "do not stay me. Do not be a bird of ill omen in my house. If a mortal man had told me to go, I would have called him false. But I heard the goddess herself. I saw her face. I will go."

He turned back to his treasure. Twelve robes of finest weave. Twelve cloaks. Twelve rugs. Twelve mantles. An equal number of shirts. Ten talents of gold. Two burnished tripods. Four cauldrons. And a beautiful Thracian cup, given to him on an embassy years ago, so precious he had never drunk from it.

He would give it all. Every last piece. For one more look at his son. For one chance to hold Hector's body and weep over it as a father should.

He drove his sons and the servants from the courtyard with his staff, cursing them for gawping while he suffered. Then he called his remaining sons by name: Helenus (HEL-eh- nus), Paris, Agathon (AG-a-thon), Pammon (PAM-on), Antiphonus (an-TIF-oh-nus), Polites (poh-LYE-teez), Deiphobus (dee-IF-oh-bus), Hippothous (hip-OH-thoh-us), Dius (DYE-us), and rebuked them for living while Hector lay dead. "Worthless sons," he cried, though his voice was more sorrow than anger. "Would that you had all been killed at the ships rather than Hector."

They loaded the wagon in silence. The mules stood patient, strong beasts from Mysia, gifts from a kingdom that no longer existed. Priam's own horses were yoked to his chariot, animals he had bred himself, fed with his own hands.

Hecuba came to them one last time. She carried a golden goblet of wine. "Make an offering to Zeus before you go," she said. "Pray for the sign of the eagle. If he sends his bird on your right hand, you will know he watches over you. If not, I would not have you go to the ships of the Argives."

Priam took the cup. He washed his hands in clean water, lifted his face to the sky, and prayed. "Father Zeus, who rules from Ida, grant that I may be received kindly in the tents of Achilles. Send your swift messenger upon my right hand, the bird of omen dearest to you, that I may trust it as I

go forth."

Zeus heard him.

From beyond the clouds, an eagle came. The great dusky hunter, the black eagle with wings spread wide as a rich man's chamber door, flew over the city on their right hand. When Priam saw it, his heart lifted like a bird itself.

He mounted his chariot. Idaeus (eye-DEE-us), his herald, took the reins of the mule-wagon. They drove out through the echoing gatehouse, past sons and sons-in-law who followed them, wailing as if for a funeral.

When they reached the plain, the family turned back. Priam and Idaeus went on alone.

Behind them, Troy faded into darkness. Ahead lay the Greek camp, the ships, and the man who had killed fifty of Priam's sons.

The old king lashed his horses forward.

FOOTNOTES

The eagle omen and divine signs in Greek culture: Priam's prayer for a sign from Zeus reflects one of the deepest practices in ancient Greek religion: divination by bird signs. An eagle appearing on the right hand was the most favorable omen possible, because the right side was associated with good fortune and the eagle was Zeus's own bird. Priam does not ask Zeus to guarantee his safety. Even he knows that no god can override Achilles's will entirely. He asks only for reassurance enough to take the next step. That is the most courage any human being can have: not certainty, but enough hope to keep moving.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Apollo defends Hector passionately despite having withdrawn his protection during the duel. Why does the god distinguish between killing Hector in battle and desecrating his body? What does this say about the difference between war and cruelty?

Priam gathers his kingdom's most precious treasures to ransom a dead body. Is this wise, or is it desperation? What would you be willing to sacrifice for the chance to mourn someone you loved properly?

Hecuba begs Priam not to go, offering logical reasons why the journey is suicidal. Priam goes anyway because a goddess told him to. When should we trust divine guidance, or any authority, over our own judgment?

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